



Henry Rodriguez fills up buckets from the River Walk for water to flush toilets during the February freeze. Buildings that were closed then will need to have their pipes checked before being reopened.

Jessica Phelps /Staff photographer

As San Antonio's post-pandemic reopening gains momentum, water is flowing through pipes and out of faucets once again. But it isn't necessarily safe to drink.

businesses, organizations and property owners that closed their premises for extended periods should flush their pipes to remove any contaminated water, according to the San Antonio Water System.

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“Stagnated water in the pipes needs to be flushed out at a business or any building that’s been shut down for any period of time,” said Kirk Nixon, SAWS’ manager of resource protection and compliance.

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Water that hasn’t moved for a long time can become discolored or cloudy, which is harmless. But in some cases, stagnation can give rise to serious bacterial growth.

SAWS says that sinks, toilets, faucets and showers should all be flushed, and it's important to run the water until discoloration or foggiess has cleared, which can take a few minutes. Even then, SAWS advises running the water a bit longer to make sure the stagnant water is all gone.

If the water remains discolored or cloudy, call the utility at 210-233-3546 to schedule an inspection.

Businesses, organizations and property owners that closed their premises for extended periods during the coronavirus pandemic should flush their pipes to remove any contaminated water, according to the San Antonio Water System.

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“In order to properly flush the building, typically speaking, you start flushing your cold water fixtures moving backward from where the water enters the house or business, such as your water main,” said Nixon. “You can do the hot water at the same time, but if you have one of those mixing valves with one handle, you’ll run cold for a few minutes and then hot after that.”

For larger buildings, such as multilevel office spaces, the process could be more complicated and take longer. Often, a building manager will be responsible for flushing out the plumbing system. But owners of smaller businesses and homeowners should do it themselves.

Properties rented through companies such as Airbnb can sit empty for long periods and should also be checked out.

On top of flushing pipes, Nixon suggested discarding ice from ice machines, inspecting plumbing for cracks caused by the February freeze and checking that your water heater is set at a sufficiently warm temperature to kill bacteria.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency recommend setting water heaters to 140 degrees, Nixon said. “If you have

lower temperatures, you run the risk of having bacteria growth in the heater,” he said.

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Not all bacteria is bad. Drinking water contains harmless microorganisms. Cloudy or discolored water is often an aesthetic issue for homes and businesses, not a safety matter.

But it's best to err on the side of safety, said Mary Jo Kirisits, a professor in the department of civil, architectural and environmental engineering at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Opportunistic human pathogens, which mostly affect those with underlying health conditions, can grow and multiply under certain conditions,” Kirisits said.

Kirisits said owners and managers of nursing homes, hospitals and elder care facilities should be especially vigilant about flushing pipes, since their plumbing systems have more places for bacteria to grow and the occupants are more vulnerable.

Serious pathogens commonly found in plumbing include mycobacterium avium complex (MAC), which can lead to tuberculosis, and pseudomonas aeruginosa, which causes a wide variety of diseases including respiratory and gastrointestinal infections.

Legionella is another bacteria that can grow in stagnant water within plumbing systems. Legionnaires' disease, which is especially dangerous to people who are immuno-compromised or have chronic lung disease, can spread through water and mist.

But such pathogens haven't been an issue in San Antonio so far, according to Nixon.

Kirisits said that flushing your faucets is a good idea whether you've been away for a long time or just a few days.

"You just want to get some fresh water running through your pipes again," she said.

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